

History of the Women's Air Raid Defense

ON DECEMBER 15, 1941, Brigadier General Howard C. Davidson, Commander of the Seventh Fighter Command, was informed that all soldiers serving as air traffic plotters at the Army's Information Center were ordered to combat duty. Davidson had one month to replace them. His solution was to establish a women's civilian unit based on the British Women's Auxiliary Air Force he had observed in London.

At four a.m. on December 16, General Davidson called Mr. Alexander Walker to ask if he and his wife Una could recruit fifty women for a secret war mission. He told them that the women must be between twenty and thirty-four years of age, trustworthy, and free of family responsibilities. They would be required to pass a physical examination, an intelligence test, clear a security investigation, be willing to be live sequestered in military quarters, and must not be subject to evacuation.

The next day, Mrs. Walker provided him with a total of fifty-four names. However, with the expansion of Oahu's radar aircraft warning system and the planned establishment of radar stations 478 on the neighboring islands, General Davidson realized he needed twice as many recruits as he anticipated.

It became apparent to Davidson that it was necessary to draw from the pool of military wives and daughters to meet his staffing quota. The problem was that military dependents were under orders to evacuate Hawaii unless they were in an "essential job." So General Davidson had to convince the U.S. Army that service in the WARD was essential to the islands' defense.

The Army agreed, and on December 26, 1941, at the first meeting of the Women's Air Raid Defense (WARD), half of the applicants were military dependents. On New Year's Day, 1942, the volunteers began their training at Iolani Place in the

former Senate Chamber. They trained for two weeks under the direction of Lieutenant Ardie Konkle. It was then that they were given the code name “Rascal.”

They were issued gasmasks, helmets, non-combatant arm bands, and measured for their uniforms. They took classes in the techniques of aircraft plotting, meteorology, military protocol and technical orders. On January 12, 1942, the first group of women went to “Little Robert” to relieve the men for a day shift.

“Little Robert” was the temporary Information Center at Fort Shafter. It was the “penthouse” of a ramshackle wooden building hidden amid abandoned warehouses at Shafter Flats. A new center, a series of tunnels dug out of a mountainside on Fort Shafter, was under construction and opened on May 12, 1942. Tradition has it that the WARD named the tunnel “Lizard” in honor of all the geckos living there.

After the defeat of the Japanese at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, most islanders considered the threat of invasion over, and their lives began to take on more normalcy. As a result, recruiting for the WARD became more challenging. Some of the original WARD members returned to their families, former careers, or interrupted studies.

The attrition rate was high—some women left due to pregnancy. Military wives left when their husbands were transferred, sent to the front, killed, or captured. At the same time, the Army was ready to establish units on Maui, the Big Island, and Kauai. Every new station meant one woman for each of the four shifts. During the summer of 1942, recruiting hit rock bottom—the employment situation on the island was critical, and salaries for women soared for office jobs that didn’t carry any of the restrictions or obligations of the WARD.

To assist with recruitment, the Army dropped the minimum age for WARD to 17, special shift arrangements were made for University of Hawaii students, a pool of

reserve women who lived at home was developed, but still, the number of women needed to staff the stations far exceeded the number of recruits.

To meet the staffing quotas of the radar centers, the Army began recruiting on the mainland. In January 1943, Colonel Lorry Tindal was assigned to work with the U.S. Army Air 480 Defense Recruiting Office in San Francisco. On February 13, 1943, the first thirty-four candidates from the mainland arrived in Hawaii. After that, four to eight women each month were sent from that office. These women signed a contract for one year with transportation furnished to and from California.

Over the course of the war, more than 650 women served in the WARD. (The listing of names can be found in the pdf COMPLETE ROSTER OF NAMES OF WOMEN'S AIR RAID DEFENSE, 1941-1945 on this website.)

In May 1945, General Davidson wrote to Kitty Coonely, the WARD Chief:

“I have seen many information control centers, I have several under me now, but the one in Honolulu manned by the WARD is the best I have seen. I understand that the war has moved on and left Honolulu behind, but you can take great pride in the fact that while it did threaten Hawaii, you maintained the best Air Raid Defense system in the world.”

The Women's Air Raid Defense stood their last shift in September 1945.

Note: I used the real names of three WARDees: Nancy West, Kathleen Hamlin and Fluff Ford. Nancy West continued to operate as a plotter after the death of her husband as portrayed in the novel. Kathleen Hamlin stayed in the WARD throughout the war knowing her husband was a Japanese Prisoner of War, and Fluff Ford plotted out her husband as he flew to Midway. Her husband never returned, but she continued to serve in the WARD until the end of the war.